No. 24 Blue Raiders win season opener over Knights

Three players reach double figures

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MURFREESBORO, Tenn. - Another double-double performance by ESPN.com First Team All-American Alysha Clark led the No. 24 ranked Middle Tennessee women's basketball team to a 78-53 victory over UCF Sunday afternoon in its season opener inside the Murphy Center in Murfreesboro, Tenn.

Clark, the reigning national scoring leader, finished with a game-high 32 points and added a team-best 15 rebounds for her 56th career double-double and 18th double-double as a Blue Raider. She topped the 30-point barrier for the 12th time in her last 13 games, dating back to last season.

At several points throughout the contest, the All-American was on pace to outscore the Knights by herself. At the 9:44 mark of the first half, both had 12 points. Clark exited the game with 5:31 to play in the first half with three fouls and 17 points. UCF (0-1) only had 19 points to that point, trailing by 11.

Despite Clark sitting on the bench, Middle Tennessee (1-0) was able to hold the Knights off the scoreboard for over four minutes. Aisha Patrick hit a jumper with 1:13 to play and Emma Cannon hit a pair of free throws to bring the visitors within seven, 30-23, at the break.

The Blue Raiders then turned up the heat early in the second half, increasing their lead to 18 over the first eight minutes on the strength of a 13-2 spurt to take a 43-25 lead on a patented turnaround fade away jumper by Brandi Brown at 12:23. It marked the first bucket of the game for the First Team All-Sun Belt performer, who finished with eight points.

Clark continued to pour in her points and with 9:35 left had 25 to UCF's 27. She finished 10-of-15 from the field and 12-of-14 from the foul line.

Senior Jackie Pickel also started slow, but ended with 12 points and a game-high four steals. She matched classmate Chelsia Lymon with a pair of 3-pointers as Middle Tennessee only hit five behind the arc. Lymon contributed 17 points with seven rebounds, one shy of her career high, to go along with a game-best six assists.

Emma Cannon paced the Knights with 19 points and a game-best 18 rebounds, including 12 on the offensive glass. Patrick chipped in 10 points to give the visitors a pair of players in double figures.

The Blue Raiders struggled to knock down shots during the opening 20 minutes, shooting just 32.1 percent. However, in the second half, the attempts began to fall and MT shot 51.4 percent from the field to finish 28-of-65 (43.1 percent) on the afternoon.

UCF converted 38.1 percent in the first half, but just 25.8 after the intermission to register a 30.8 percent (16-of-52) effort in the game.

Middle Tennessee will return to action when it makes its first road trip of the season, heading to Baton Rouge, La., to face No. 9 LSU at 7 p.m. Wednesday. The Blue Raiders have won each of the last two meetings with the Lady Tigers. LSU was victorious in its season opener Sunday, defeating Centenary 92-19.

Middle Tennessee Postgame Quotes:
Head Coach Rick Insell:

On Alysha Clark stepping up in the first half when the rest of the team had a slow start
Really and truly, we are 0-12 with two of our best shooters (Jackie Pickel and Brandi Brown) in the first half. At halftime, it was 30-23. If we hit five of those 3s, it is 45-23. Have you ever seen Brandi as open as she was in the first half? You just gotta keep shooting when you are a shooter. What really got them back on track in the second half is when they took it and put it against the glassboth of them. Jackie put hers against the glass and she started wearing it out. Brandi too. When we put her inside and isolated her in the post, she made two or three big time moves.

How surprised were you that they did not double up Alysha earlier?
Well I think they thought they were quick enough and tough enough to handle Alysha Clark. Alysha does not look like she is that strong but she really is a deceiving-type player. You watch her warming up and you think you can handle her until you get out there with her and she is able to seal you off and make some of her patented moves.

On the play of Dymon Raynor
Boy we got some good minutes out of Dymon in the first half. She came in and got some deflections and really got some strength in there against the big kid (Cannon) and I thought she did a good job.

On Dana Garrett
Dana Garrett can turn it on whenever she wants to turn it on. We were wanting to isolate her late and she was wanting to give the ball up. She had a couple of times that she could have went in there and done her thing but she did not.

On the offensive struggles at the end of the game and the ability of the defense to hold UCF
As bad a game as Jackie Pickel had, she had a great defensive game. Chelsie Wiley is their shooter. She had five points in the first half. She went 2-for-7. She can wear it out and Jackie did a tremendous job on her.

What were your thoughts at halftime?
I was disappointed in the way we handled the last eight minutes with Alysha out. We needed some people to step up and we started thinking about shooting the basketball instead of just shooting it. You cannot do that and that is what we did.

On Chelsia and Alysha's play in the first half
Well Chelsia, when she has to step up, she will. She knew that they were really pressuring out on the wing with Anne Marie (Lanning) and Jackie, and Brandi was questioning herself. Two or three times Chelsia took it upon herself and went inside and made a layup, got fouled and put her free throws in. We were 17-of-21 from the free throw line so that is a lot better.

On UCF's Emma Cannon
We gotta do a better job in giving somebody 18 rebounds. We are better than that. She is a great player but we are better than that. I am telling you, she has got a nose for the basketball, does she not? That 84-inch reach she has is tough. I was telling Brandi to knock the ball down. If you cannot get a hold of it knock it down. She knocked a couple of them down and we were able to run it down and secure the rebound. Really and truly, something like that, Brandi deserves half a rebound.

In the first half when they were really crashing the boards, Alysha made an adjustment to kind of sag off a little bit to get herself in better rebounding position. Is that something you did?
No. They put in someone we consider a non-shooter. That is when we started backing off. (D'Nay) Daniels is a great player too. She got in foul trouble and they had to put Leah Paige in and another player, I cannot remember the number, and they were not looking to shoot the ball. They were looking to pass the ball down low so we were able to sag off and give Brandi and Dymon some help on the big kid.

On Alysha Clark's play while having four fouls in the second half
Alysha's smart. She is so intelligent basketball-wise that I did not have any problem with her playing. I did not really have any problem with Brandi playing. Both of them had four fouls and I figured that if Alysha fouled out we could go back with Brandi and that is why I kind of held her out. I thought Dymon and Dana did a good job. We have been working Dana in the post, so it was an opportunity for us to throw her in there.

On Tina Stewart's performance
She did good. We had about a 24-25 point lead I think, maybe more, and I wanted to get Kortni (Jones) in there and see how she would handle the situation and she figured out real quick that Dorothy was not in Kansas.

Are you happy with the way she (Kortni) responded?
Oh yeah. I was happy with all my guards. I thought we kept them to the sidelines. We felt like taking away the center would hurt them some and it did. They like to take it to the heart of the lane. That way they can dump it to the big kid. We did not let them get in there. I thought our kids did a good job. That was Anne Marie, Dana and Jackie that did that.

Player Quotes:
Alysha Clark:

Talk a little bit about the first half and how you and Chelsia kind of took over the struggling offense.
Yeah. We were talking before about how there is no looking back. It is our senior year. There are no do-overs. The road to where we want to go started tonight so we knew that coming in and we wanted to come out and start strong. When everybody was not clicking, that is just what you have to do sometimes. You have to step up and kind of take over yourself.

Did you feel that as a team ya'll would get into a better rhythm in the second half?
Definitely. There is two halves to the game. If you have a bad first half, you cannot pout and be upset because you still have 20 more minutes to play. We practice with each other every day, obviously, so we know what each other can do. Coming into the second half, we knew we were gonna have to pick it up and we were not worried at all.

The schedule does not get any easier coming up. You guys have LSU later this week. What do think a game like this does for you as a team?
I think it tests us right from the beginning. That is what we asked for. So for the younger players to see that right from the start you have to take care of business. It is not 'oh, four games down the line we can start to pick it up.' Playing teams like UCF and LSU right off the bat lets them know we are serious about what we want to do here.

On the crowd
It was really good. That is something that really helped us. Playing in front of your home crowd is always an advantage and they were definitely into it today from start to finish.

Chelsia Lymon:
You really pushed the pace, got a couple of outlet passes ahead to Alysha. Talk about the decision to kind of force the issue a little bit in the first half
Well they were giving it to us. We take whatever they give us. Early on, we did not have the transition because they were keying in on Alysha. Then, I guess they started seeing they could handle it a little bit and that is when Alysha started getting open. We just made adjustments to whatever defenses they threw at us. And yeah, it is a sense of urgency. We are gonna have to play like that and play better throughout the season. We cannot hang our heads when things start going wrong. We have just gotta keep pushing it.

They were an athletic and aggressive team. Your presence as point seemed to kind of keep everybody calmed down.
They were a pretty good team. They were very aggressive on defense. We had to protect the ball on every possession and make sure every possession counted. They did really well on pressuring out on the guards and being physical.

In the first half they were getting a lot of rebounds. Chelsia, you actually led the team in rebounds in the first half. Alysha, you were able to sag off and get in better position for rebounds. Was that kind of a conscious effort to crash down?
You see with Alysha and Brandi, what people fail to realize is that they focus on blocking the big girls out so it is up to us guards to find open spots and go and retrieve the ball. You see Brandi and Alysha working hard, the least we can do is go get the ball.

You were able to get a break today because Tina and Kortni came in. What did you think of their play?
They did really well. I just try to continue to talk to them and let them know how important their position is on the court. To come off the bench is just as important as me starting. They come out and give that spark. I was kind of upset about that steal Kortni got cause I had just told her to protect the ball with her other hand but she is learning it. She is wanting to learn it so that is making my job a lot easier.

UCF Postgame Quotes:
Coach Joi Williams:

On today's game
We have a lot of respect for this program and I thought it was a great way to test the waters and see how we stack up. I am disappointed, especially with our second half effort but they are a good team, and our team can learn a lot from this. We played a tough schedule last year and we are doing the same this year. We want to play the best opponents so we can get ready for the Conference USA season.

On Middle Tennessee's press
We had a lot of unforced turnovers. We knew they were going to stick to the press. At halftime, we were looking at 17 turnovers and that is unacceptable. In the second half, we did a better job. We just had some empty offensive possessions. After we broke the press, we did not get much out of our offense.

On defending Alysha Clark
It is very difficult to defend her. She does not do anything flashy, she is real methodical. We showed our team a lot of film on her but it is hard to explain it until you see her in person. I think she is a heck of a player. She takes what the defense gives her. She does not rush and does a very good job. I think our team saw why she is an All-American.

On UCF's defense
Our game plan was to come out and be aggressive. That is really the only way we know how to play. I think when we get passive like we did in the second half, you see what happens. We wanted to come out and play aggressively without fouling. We knew (Brandi) Brown, (Jackie) Pickel and Clark were going to score points, and when you look at the first half stats (Chelsia) Lymon and Clark were the only ones on the scoreboard. Our plan was to get up and play fundamental, pressure, man-to-man defense and give them one shot. That is where we broke down, was giving up a lot of offensive rebounds.

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